

# Lesson 18

## The Development of Labor Unions

### Objective

- To understand the impact of early labor unions on American workers

### Notes to the Teacher

In the late nineteenth century, factory workers did not enjoy the fruits of industry to the same degree as corporate businessmen. Workers' complaints included low wages, long hours, dangerous and unhealthy working conditions, irregular employment, technological unemployment, company towns, and impersonal owner-employee relations. However, the consolidation of workers into labor unions was slow. Americans' strong belief in the Protestant work ethic, the idea that one rises from the working class to the middle class on the basis of individual merit, partially explains the difficulty in organizing laborers. Government leaders, reflecting traditional American individualism, supported business leaders at the expense of workers. Still, labor unions, including the Knights of Labor, American Federation of Labor, and Industrial Workers of the World, organized, with varying degrees of success, to protect the interests of factory workers.

In this lesson, students complete a chart and answer questions to assess the accomplishments and failures of early labor unions.

### Procedure

1. Introduce the lesson using material in the Notes to the Teacher.
2. Distribute **Handout 18**. Students should have completed a textbook assignment on this material before attempting this activity. You may find it helpful to have encyclopedias or labor texts in class when students complete this activity. Henry Pelling's *American Labor* or James E. Bruner, Jr.'s *Industrialism: The American Experience* might be especially helpful. The chart may be completed as either a large-group or small-group

activity. Reserve class time for discussion if students work on the chart in small groups.

### 3. Suggested Responses: Chart

Knights of Labor

*Founder and date: Uriah Stephens, 1869*

*Members: all workers, except Chinese*

*Goals: eight-hour day, prohibition, inflation, abolition of child labor, and establishment of producers' and consumers' cooperatives*

*Successes: won several strikes and made impressive wage gains in 1885–86*

*Problems: vague and unrealistic goals, ineffective leadership, loss of several important strikes, failure of cooperatives, ease of replacing unskilled members in strikes, and association with the Haymarket Affair*

American Federation of Labor

*Founder and date: Samuel Gompers, 1881*

*Members: skilled workers in separate craft unions*

*Goals: bread-and-butter issues, such as better wages, shorter hours, and better working conditions*

*Successes: Anthracite Coal Strike of 1902, membership of over one million workers by 1901*

*Problems: only small part of work force eligible to join AFL, American individualism*

Industrial Workers of the World

*Founders and date: Bill Haywood and Daniel DeLeon, 1905*

*Members: all workers, particularly unskilled, casual, and marginal laborers*

*Goals: overthrow of capitalism and putting means of production in hands of workers*

*Successes: won American Woolen Strike of 1912, left spiritual heritage of organized labor in large number of songs and stories*

*Problems: relatively small membership (never over 13,000), public opposition to violent tactics and revolutionary aims*

4. Have students answer the questions following the chart on **Handout 18** in a large-group session.

**Suggested Responses:**

1.
  - a. *indifference of workers to union membership drives; lack of public support for union tactics*
  - b. *general satisfaction with American lifestyle; reluctance to give up freedom to bargain individually*
  - c. *sent state militias or National Guard to assist owners in quelling strikes in an effort to protect private property of the owners*
  - d. *issued injunctions, or court orders, forbidding strikes as “conspiracies in restraint of trade” and a violation of the Sherman Anti-trust Act of 1890*
2. *Answers will vary, but students should recognize that public and government opposition combined with union weaknesses to prevent unions from making more significant gains during the period before 1920.*

## The Development of Labor Unions

Fill in the chart and answer the questions below. When you have finished, you should have a good overview of the goals, accomplishments, and problems of early labor unions.

	<b>Knights of Labor</b>	<b>American Federation of Labor</b>	<b>Industrial Workers of the World</b>
<b>Founder Date</b>			
<b>Members</b>			
<b>Goals</b>			
<b>Successes</b>			
<b>Problems</b>			

1. In spite of impressive gains for organized labor in the Gilded Age, unions enrolled no more than ten percent of the nonagricultural work force by 1910. How do each of the following factors help to account for the relatively small union membership at that time?

a. Belief in individual opportunity

b. Immigrants' distrust of unions

c. Actions of governors and U.S. presidents in strikes

d. Actions of federal courts in strikes

2. Write a one-sentence summary explaining why these early labor unions failed, for the most part, to accomplish their goals.